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The Rhetoric of Justice: a Poststructuralist Reading of the Exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*

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Introduction

Plato's Republic remains one of the foundational works in Western political philosophy. One of the main reasons for this is that the dialogue addresses topics essential to the legitimacy of any state. What is "justice"? What are the effects of "just" and "unjust" actions?

In the Republic the main antagonist for Socrates was the sophist Thrasymachus. In addressing the question of "effects," Thrasymachus suggested that there are material rewards from "injustice" in business, taxes, and in politics.¹ In politics, the most "unjust," the tyrant, will have the greatest material well being.² Socrates responded to this assertion by claiming the superiority of transcendental values as he sought to demonstrate that "reason" and the quest for "knowledge" cannot be satisfied by material comforts and the sensual pleasures they bring. In

building a case for practical side of transcendental rewards, much of the Republic seeks to offer a response to the claims of Thrasymachus³.

The bulk of this paper, however, will focus on the discussion between Thrasymachus and Socrates over the definition of “justice.” As Hanna Pitkin correctly concluded, Socrates’ definition of “justice” claimed that ‘justice is everyone doing what is appropriate to him.’⁴ However, the idea of “appropriateness” is not a satisfactory solution unless there is a background against which the “appropriateness” of actions can be judged. “Justice” as “appropriateness” only has meaning if the validity of the ontological and epistemological structures used to make determinations of “appropriateness” can be established beyond question. If that foundation is suspect the entire content of the “ideal state” is incoherent.

This paper will present a poststructuralist reading of the exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus over the definition of “justice.” It will be argued that the assertions of Thrasymachus have some elements that parallel the claims of contemporary poststructuralist philosophy. In addition, the claims of Thrasymachus regarding the relationship between power and the ability to define the “just” also resemble the assertions of poststructuralism. A poststructuralist reading of this exchange suggests that by rejecting the doctrine of the forms, the fixed identity of the “soul,” and the “naturalness” of Socrates’ social hierarchy, Thrasymachus had taken the first step toward a comprehensive critique of power - the distinction between state power and the formation of a normative system that legitimates its use.

For Thrasymachus, subjects act “justly” when they comply with the commands of their rulers.⁵ Therefore, the definitional content of “justice” is produced by the social/political system. It is not a transcendental product. As such, “justice” is a contingent, historical phenomenon. It

is relative to the constellation of power that defines the “just.” “Justice” cannot be separated from the application of power that its practice legitimates. For Thrasymachus, “justice” could only be determined in relation to the system of political power found within the state. By denying the possibility that any “ideal” statement about “justice” can take place outside of a discursive universe that is dominated by power, Thrasymachus occupied the only possible remaining space: that “justice is the interest of the stronger.”⁶

I. A. The Column: The “Doctrine of the Forms”

According to Jacques Derrida, Western philosophy has sought to create a strategy for the representation of “truth” that is anchored in a system of “verification” independent of the “shadow” of sense impressions and randomness of purely “subjective” thought.⁷ In the Platonic dialogues this goal was satisfied by the “doctrine of the forms.” The concept of “forms,” as unchanging, ideal, and universal “being” provided the cornerstone of the epistemological and ontological systems outlined by Socrates. “Being” is the subject of knowledge,⁸ and “being” is a quality that can only be applied to that which does not change. What is immediate and open to the senses is subject to transformation. Sense impressions are not the true subjects of “knowledge.” The term “knowledge” can only be appropriately applied to that which is absolute.⁹

The metaphysical assumptions in the epistemology of the “forms” makes the Socratic ideal of “justice” possible. The doctrine of the forms provided the column that supported the intricate and interconnected claims about human nature, political hierarchy, and the way to

“knowing.” It is the foundation for the “proof” of the immortality of the soul and the mind/body dualism that makes the reason/emotion distinction possible. It is also the underlying element in the critique of writing, the assertion that knowledge is remembering, and the conclusion that for the good of the state, are must be censored. Only if there is a “form” that contains unchanging, universal truth can the idea of an “absolutist” critique of practice be intelligible.

Socrates sought to provide for this possibility through the construction of a system of “knowledge” that makes such absolutes the “true” reality. He created this foundation by seeking to demonstrate the distinct, separable, and hierarchical nature of mind and body. In the Phaedo Socrates asserted that for knowledge to be possible the mind and the body must be separate. The mind attains “true knowledge,” knowledge of the unchanging forms, only after death.¹⁰ For Socrates, such a claim is necessary in order to complete the logical connection between the concept of “forms,” as the transcendental signified, and the power that Socrates wants to grant to human intellect. The mind must have some familiarity with the absolutes in order for it to critique that which is changeable. However, the “forms” represent the “true reality,” not sense impressions. Empirical representations of this “realm of forms” are imperfect, temporary, images of the pure, infinite, and universal state of “being.”¹¹

Only in “reflection” does the soul get a clear image of things.¹² This is the case because the world of sense impressions is subject to change. Therefore, sense impressions cannot be trusted.¹³ How, then, would it be possible to make universal statements regarding judgments of beauty, goodness, and justice, unless that knowledge was prior to the confusing and “impure” phenomenon of the senses? Universals cannot be deduced from the senses, nor can they be inductively generated from the senses and still remain “universals.” Therefore, for Socrates to

grant universal status to the forms they must exist prior to the senses. And, in order for human beings to have access to the idealizations, Socrates asserts that the soul is reborn with a faint memory of its unity with the universal.¹⁴ With the recollection of the pure form of “being,” the imperfect world can be ordered in relation to that universal.¹⁵

According to Socrates, one can come to an understanding of the forms from the use of “dialectical” reasoning. The dialectic engages our desire for “knowledge,” by the process of continually questioning the premises of all discourse. The dialectic raises our “understanding” to a perception of “absolute being” by always moving discourse toward the unity of “being” and “knowing” in the realm of the forms.¹⁶ Only when the soul has endured the light of “being” can the soul be turned from the shadows.¹⁷ When the mind has an understanding of the pure form, it is able to order the world according to the pure form of being.¹⁸

B. The Ax: The Poststructuralist Critique of the “Transcendental Signified”

Much of the poststructuralist interest in Plato has focused on the role the dialogues have played in establishing a foundation for the Western conceptualizations of “knowing.” Plato is seen as an early purveyor (if not the “origin”) of a system of conceptualization in which the “sign” seeks to capture “being” by its transmission. In that sense, the Socratic argument goes in a circle. If you accept any of the assumptions the others follow. If you do not, the system collapses.

This reading of the Socratic position suggests that the realm of pure being must first be assumed in order for any of the Socratic “proofs” to be effective. In contrast to the choice

between no knowledge and the ontological dualism suggested in the Phaedo, the poststructuralist position would claim that: 'either "knowledge" must be kept in quotation marks in order to demonstrate its contingent and historical nature, or it must be dependent upon a speculative metaphysics that attempts to "prove" its universal nature through the presupposition of its own being.' In the former case, the idea of Knowledge is abandoned to the idea of "knowledges." In the latter, the conditions for "knowledge" are presumed and the use of this presupposition is treated as sufficient to validate its "being."¹⁹

This notion, that the presuppositions necessary for "knowledge" constitute a "proof" of a claim to "knowledge," is challenged by the poststructuralists. From Plato to Husserl idealization has as its meaning the simultaneous confirmation of objectivity and interiority, one by the other.²⁰ From this point of view, the circular nature of Socrates' argument becomes apparent. The assumption of "forms" reinforces the notion of an objective column of "being" around which text can be generated. The generation of text *from* "being" reinforces the text *of* "being" within the column of "truth." If, however, the column has no being, then the text of Western metaphysics revolves around a column which is itself not there.²¹

According to Michel Foucault, Socrates exemplified the Greek search for "nomos," the order that is the "order of the universe," that "being" from which all temporal "knowledge" springs.²² The classical system presupposed an order to nature.²³ It provided names that conferred "being" on the objects of this orderly universe.²⁴ However, stressing the structure of empirical inquiry ("episteme") out of which "knowledge" is created (rather than "discovered"), Foucault argued that it is important to distinguish between "knowledge" and the rules that govern its acquisition.²⁵ Applied to the Socratic enterprise, Socrates was establishing a system for

acquiring “knowledge” as he set the boundaries for what is to be included and excluded from consideration in the domain of knowledge. It is only the process of establishing a closed epistemological framework that makes the acquisition of “knowledge” possible.

Socrates can only *assume* that the column has “being.” And, if the same column that supports the doctrine of “forms,” also supports the mind/body dualism inherent in the Socratic conception of human nature, as it is the necessary condition for the immortality of the soul, the Socrates admits that his “proof” is lacking.²⁶ Even if immortality of the soul cannot be proven, Socrates claimed that belief in this doctrine is useful for the “effect” it has on the people.²⁷ This statement can only mean one thing. The social function of “truth” is more important than the truth value of “truth.” It is here that the column begins to collapse.

If Socrates admits that he cannot prove the interrelated claims of “forms,” “immortality,” and “ontological dualism,” he cannot exclude the empirical from the ideal. As claimed by Foucault, the important question is not what something “is,” but how it operates.²⁸ And, if that is the case, the social function of the Socratic metaphysics cannot be ignored. The doctrine of the “forms” cannot be separated from the system of power that it makes possible. Socrates may have admitted that his wisdom comes from the admission of his ignorance, but that does not negate the fact that there are social consequences from the metaphysical claims that he sought to demonstrate.

Foucault’s point in The Order of Things is that the system used to order and classify contains meanings and hierarchies that are not given a priori, but are historically and culturally determined.²⁹ It is this historical-cultural order that establishes the empirical order. Foucault stated, that at any given historical period there is one “episteme” that defines the condition of

knowledge for that age.³⁰ Since the time of Plato, the concern for the conditions of discourse represented by the sophists, of which Thrasymachus was one, has been gradually replaced by the Platonic ideal of true and false discourses.³¹

How has the power of this discourse come to dominate the discourses on “knowledge,” “being,” and “justice,” if it is not demonstratively “true?” In his work Dissemination Jacques Derrida examines both the form of cultural transmission and the content of the Socratic enterprise. To Derrida, culture represents a “text” that is neither true nor false. Texts establish the preconditions for discourse. In that sense, all textual systems are supported by some metaphysical assumptions.³² The problem, from Derrida’s perspective, is that the postulation of a realm of “forms” in the Socratic epistemology, no less that the “ding an sich” in Kant, creates a closed structure of identity in which “truth,” and “being” reside.

In contrast to the transcendental signified that has supported Western philosophy since Plato, Derrida suggests that “identities” cannot be closed. In the form suggested by Socrates, the text defines identity, which seeks to recreate the presence of “being.” Language is directed at the task of representing the world. In this way two tasks are simultaneously achieved. The identity of objects is secured through their correspondence to the transcendental signified. Secondly, the space for the identity of “subjectivity,” as the one who speaks of “being,” is reinforced in the process of identifying objects.

Derrida suggests an alternative strategy for reading that does not allow for the closed formalization of texts.³³ The significance of this strategy is that it denies the possibility of asserting universality in claims regarding social and political “truths.” Central to this position is the concept of “dissemination.” If the transcendental signified does not lie behind positive

assertions to “truth” then all texts only refer to other texts.³⁴ Texts reproduce and disseminate themselves in a process by which validity comes from the “traces” of previous texts that they contain. As texts reproduce themselves, repetition becomes the source for the illusion of universal validity.³⁵ The column of this “truth” then supports the “frame” of representations, the historically contingent discursive structures that substitute for “being.”

If Socrates was engaged in “dissemination” rather than capturing the outline of “universal being” then the conclusions he reached about “justice” cannot be supported. If “justice” means doing what is “appropriate,” and the judgment of “appropriateness” is the result of cultural, historical, and economic variables, then Socrates’ assertions regarding “justice” cannot represent universal propositions. In the Gorgias, this problem is identified by Callicles, as he stated to Socrates, “...you drag us into these tiresome popular fallacies, looking to what is fine and noble, not by nature, but by convention.”³⁶ In the language of the poststructuralists, in order for the Socratic assertion regarding justice not to collapse into ambiguity and tautological nonsense Socrates must be able to establish a strategy which validates the transcendental signified that serve as the validating foundation underlying his claims.³⁷ Instead, all that Socrates had done is to link metaphor to metaphor, heaping “traces” upon “traces,” as if the validity of the present traces is secured by the previous traces they contain. This strategy is precisely the one which “deconstruction” seeks to unmask as it reveals the “illusion of autonomy” in discourse.³⁸ The result is that the authors and readers of a cultural “text,” of which the Socratic notion of “justice” is one example, have no fixed place, no background, from which to judge the validity of the “text.”³⁹

The Socratic notion of “justice” hypothesizes a fixed universal form. Thrasymachus, on

the other hand, indicates that the specific determinations of “just” and “unjust” are relative to the institutional form in which the determinations are made.⁴⁰ If the determination of “just” and “unjust” are not universal but relative to “institutional” conditions, then even the narrow claim of Thrasymachus, that “justice” is determined by the interests of the government⁴¹ may be read as reflecting an epistemological challenge to the doctrine of the forms.

Socrates was clearly aware of the stakes in his discussions with Thrasymachus and the other sophists. If “being” cannot be pinned down then truth appears to shift ground. This would lead us to believe that nothing is stable and that both sides of an argument could be true.⁴² If one takes the prescription in the Phaedrus at face value, that no one should speak without “truth,” the political prescription is clear. Only those who share the Socratic onto-theology of “being” should be allowed to speak.⁴³ The same rationale applies to the censorship of all “discordant” texts found in the Republic. (see the Republic, Book Two and Book Ten.)

Socrates understood what the sophists meant; without the transcendental realm of the forms all that remains is “text.” Speaking text tot text, Socrates called “rhetoric.” Rhetoric engages the type of words where meaning “fluctuates.”⁴⁴ To the sophists and the poststructuralists, both of whom see the historical character of texts, the meaning of the words will change because the substance of the context from which words derive their meanings will change. There is nothing other than rhetoric.

II.A.The Frame: Ontology and Epistemology in the Form of Subjectivity

The doctrine of the forms provides both an ontological and an epistemological foundation

for Socrates' representation of "subjectivity." "Truth," "beauty," and "justice" have absolute forms that provide the foundation for judgements about the empirical world. However, Socrates ascribed "absolute being" to something that is a component of the complete human being. To that part of eternal "being" which is shared by humans Socrates applied the term "soul." While the body is a necessary "condition" for physical movement, it is the soul that animates it.⁴⁵ However, if the soul is eternal then Socrates' characterization of it must constitute a universal statement regarding the nature of human "subjectivity."

The soul of human beings is immortal, endlessly reborn in the cycle of bodily birth and death. Having been united with "absolute being" at the passing of the body the soul has a recollection of those absolutes after rebirth.⁴⁶ The body is, therefore, a prison for the soul.⁴⁷ It is responsible for the distortions, confusions, and appetites that plague human existence.⁴⁸ Service to the appetites of the body causes lust, war, revolutions, and the degradation of the state. (see the Phaedo, and Book Two of the Republic.)

Socrates described the soul as having four faculties: "reason," "understanding," "faith or conviction," and "perception."⁴⁹ Arranged hierarchically, reason is the highest. Reason is presented as the soul dialectical power, the force that contemplates "being" in the realm of absolutes. "Understanding" also does not directly rely on sense impressions, but its domain is the abstract and hypothetical.⁵⁰ To Socrates the hypotheses of math and science are subsumed under this category. "Faith" is that which an individual believes to be true. However, given that the source for this belief is not contemplation of the absolute, but the sensations that come from the body, faith only represents the "shadows," the appearance of truth, not truth itself. The final faculty, perception, Socrates associates with sensation, that quality of cognition given by the

senses.

In addition to the four faculties of the soul, Socrates asserted in various places in the dialogues that the soul has three parts⁵¹ or three principles.⁵² In the Phaedrus the soul is described as being like two parts “steeds” and one part “charioteer.” The charioteer is to control the drives for glory and uncontrolled gratification.⁵³

In the Republic, however, the political significance of the triadic division of human nature manifests itself in a prescriptive hierarchy. “Justice” in the state parallels the just order of the elements of the soul in the individual.⁵⁴ When Socrates spoke of the “soul” having three different elements, his statement of the “natural condition” provided a basis for creating the “just” organization of elements found in any state. The three elements of the soul, “reason,” “passion,” and “appetites,”⁵⁵ require an organizational hierarchy in order for the state to achieve its telos. Reason gives “wisdom,” the characteristic that is most valued in ruling.⁵⁶ Passion provides courage, honor, and commitment, the characteristics best ascribed to a class of warriors. Finally, the appetites generate the desire for material possessions and gratification of the needs and desires of the body. The human soul directed by appetites will be the merchants and artisans in the Socratic state.

From these three elements of the soul spring different priorities in the conduct of state rulership. Rule by honor and courage alone brings “Timocracy,” an imperfect form of government which is characterized by too much ambition and conflict.⁵⁷ Rule by the people of appetites brings disorder to the city by suggesting that all are “equal” in spirit because of their equal need for the necessities of the body.⁵⁸ Rule by the demos will result in a disorderly state, a place where appetite rules principle.⁵⁹ Only where philosophers, as those whose intellectual

power can dialectically commune with pure “being,” have the power to rule can the “natural” order of human beings be reflected in the natural order of the state.

In order to be “just” the state must reflect the natural order of “being.” Socrates’ argument is simple: that because only the philosopher is aware of all three elements of the soul, and because only the philosopher controls the “steeds” in his/her being through the use of reason, only the philosopher is fit to rule. Establishing a hierarchy that places contemplation of “form” at the pinnacle of human activity carries with it a “natural” hierarchy in politics.

II.B. The Fire: The Poststructuralist Critique of “Subjectivity”

From the perspective of poststructuralism, ordering and classifying gives shape and meaning to the world. But this knowledge is “created,” it is not something that is discovered. Therefore, contrary to the Socratic view, the “grid” that allows for the classification of objects is not a priori.⁶⁰ If there is not “column of being” in the doctrine of “forms” there can also be no fixed definition of “subjectivity” as the foundation for political practice. Human beings are made “subjects” by historical contexts.⁶¹

If the “truth” of the forms cannot be proven, the real question regarding forms concerns the “function” that this concept served in the system of thought outlined by Socrates. For the discussion of “justice” in the ideal state the static notion of “forms” provided the epistemological foundation for a stable concept of human “subjectivity.” A stable human identity provides the frame upon which a “natural” order for the society can be constructed. However, without the stability of the “forms,” as an epistemological precondition for a notion of “subjectivity,” any

conception of the “subject” is tentative and unstable.

If “truth” was not the outcome of the Socratic investigation of “being,” “subjectivity,” and politics, then another question needs to be addressed. If Michel Foucault is correct, that the “subject” is constituted within a system of power relations, then the question for inquiry concerns the type of domination that is replicated and reinforced by a system of fixed identities.⁶² From Foucault’s perspective, a genealogy of the power relations established by the dialogues will uncover the only substance that can be revealed by the text. The “function” of the discourse on human activity is revealed as the maintenance of a text on human beings that will both stabilize “identity” and serve as the preconditions for the creation of other texts about human behavior.

The problem that emerges is touched on by the poststructuralists in a variety of writings. The central issue, however, remains the same. Establishing a “fixed identity” for human beings as the “natural” order of being is epistemologically indefensible. If “subjectivity” reflects conditions that are historically contingent, no fixed and eternal definition of “subjectivity” is possible. In the political arena, the extent to which “subjectivity” provides the frame for the creation of “constitutions,” “collective punitive statutes,” and “policy actions,” the foundations is poured onto a shifting ground. The very attempt to establish fixed forms that represent the “order of the universe” will create a totalizing political discourse that must repress all alternative discourses on the subject. The process of creating a definition of human “subjectivity” provides the basis for establishing “normal” and “abnormal” patterns of behavior, sets the boundaries for what is “acceptable” as “truth” within the discourse on human beings, determines the parameters of identity and non-identity for “objective” study, and fixes a hierarchy as the “natural” condition of order. The constitutional structures, legal statutes, and collective action taken by the

“legitimate” government can be brought to bear on any alternative discourse. Power creates a “totalizing discourse” on the “subject.” This total view then serves to mask repression.⁶³

The text on “subjectivity,” however, is not sufficient to establish the “truth” of any particular definition of the subject. If the metaphysics outlined by Socrates does not represent “truth,” a condition that even he seems willing to admit, then what function does it serve? The identity of the subject, coupled with the idea of the soul’s immortality, establishes a theological presence from which to exercise power. The truth of the transcendental “being” reflected through the human subject infuses the acts of subjects with the authority of universal “truth.”⁶⁴ The aim of poststructuralism, as discussed by Derrida, is to prevent any concept of “being” from governing from a theological center.⁶⁵

III.A. The Performance: Justice as the “Natural Order” of Human Relationships

The strategy of the Republic is to reveal the content of eternal “justice” when applied to human affairs. The existence of the eternal form of “justice” is a precondition for the definition of “justice.” Socrates’ conclusion was that each should have an “appropriate” place within the hierarchy.⁶⁶ However, without a definition of “appropriate” the Socratic formulation is reducible to tautological nonsense. Any conception of “justice” that is not based on the universal form of “justice” must be mere illusion.⁶⁷

As Socrates stated repeatedly throughout the dialogues, there is a difference between the “idea” and the things to which “ideas” are applied. In applying the idea of “justice” to the whole society, Socrates concluded that the “well-ordered” state represents “justice.”⁶⁸ In order to be a

“well-ordered” state human associations must represent a “natural” order. Evil and injustice are doing what is not “natural.”⁶⁹

To Socrates the appropriate metaphor for establishing what is “natural” in the state can be found in the already established hierarchy found in the human character. “Justice” is the institution of the “natural order” in the state as in the soul.⁷⁰ In the state, those who are governed by the lower instincts, the “appetites,” constitute the bottom of Socrates’ “natural” order. For these people, “justice” requires that they are the artisans, producers, and merchants.⁷¹ Superior to this class, are the class of people who are driven by “passion,” “honor,” and “courage.” For these individuals the “natural” order suggests that they become warriors.⁷²

Ruling the ideal state, however, requires a special class of people. These individuals, the “guardians,” have capacities that are qualitatively distinct and superior to the other classes of people in the Socratic formulation. In the character of the guardians, reason is the strongest attribute. When the soul has reason it lifts itself from the darkness of the cave, into the light of pure “being.” Only the persons of reason can apply “justice” because only they can understand the universal form of “justice.”

Much of the Republic focuses on the care that must be given to the selection and training of the guardians. The earliest training must be in gymnastics and music. The physical strength of the body must be developed, as must the knowledge of harmony be learned in order for the soul to see the harmony that underlies all things.⁷³ However, innovations in musical harmony are to be resisted because of the danger that this may pose for the entire state.⁷⁴ As education continues the most promising students are taught math and science. In this way they come to some “understanding” of the world, the arts necessary for warriors.⁷⁵

“Understanding,” however, is not “knowledge.” As training continues a few will be noticed as having a special talent. These future guardians will then be trained in the “dialectic.” The “dialectic” is a term used to describe a method of thought. It raises the “understanding” of the world to the level of “knowledge” through the contemplation of pure “being” and the unity of all things.⁷⁶ By the application of “first principles” to the particulars of empirical reality the guardian rises above the contemplation that is clouded by sense impressions. Only then can the mind descend back into the realm of the shadows without being subject to the power of their illusion.⁷⁷ It is only after the contemplation of the first principles that the individual is capable of critique, criticism, and the wisdom to apply the universal of “justice” to the events of human life.

The dialectic, however, is a danger in the hands of all those not of such intellect and disposition. The study of the dialectic must only be open to a very small class of individuals that have excelled at all the other aspects of their training. Students of the dialectic are “lawless.”⁷⁸ Such a mind will question moral principles, civil legislation, and the legislators that have written it.⁷⁹ In the hands of a person who does not first understand the ideal harmony of nature and the perfect form of “justice,” the dialectic will bring skepticism, disrespect, and chaos. An awareness that an ideal form of “justice exists is the only protection from the disorder potentially generated from the dialectic.

At most, it can be said that the Socratic concept of “justice” represented in the Republic was defined as ‘the harmonious union of diverse and distinct elements, each having their place in the “natural” hierarchy.’ Therefore, the Republic does not really define “justice,” except in this limited sense. The Republic’s purpose was to define a mechanism by which the exercise of power can be rationally applied in the establishment of a social hierarchy. That application of

power, however, is irrational if the hierarchical distinction among subjects cannot be demonstrated to qualify as something that is unchanging, pure, permanent “being.”

There is no doubt that the Republic sought to realize the “Socratic ideal” in human relations. To that end, Socrates outlines a structure of the state that, he claimed, reflected the universal “form” of “justice.” For Socrates, once established, the exercise of state power was justified in order to maintain this “natural order” in the name of “universal truth and justice.” Good rulership, after all, will require lies.⁸⁰

III.B. The Yoke and the Chain: The Rhetoric of “Justice” as the Technology of Power

Rule will require lies.⁸¹ But what is rulership if the entire system created by Socrates is built upon a “lie”? If the doctrine of the forms is treated as onto-theological speculation rather than the foundation of “truth,” is the mechanism Socrates described for finding “justice” still valid? If the triadic representation of the soul is an interpretive pass at comprehension rather than a reflection of fixed and universal “subjectivity,” can the hierarchy and domination suggested by this system by “justified”? All of Socrates’ answers are open to question once the status of the “transcendental signified” is questioned.

To state this problem in a slightly different way, Socrates never demonstrates that he has moved beyond rhetoric, even though he repeatedly suggests rhetoric’s dangers. In the Phaedrus Socrates described rhetoric as the influencing of minds with words.⁸² Rhetoric shifts ground and misleads people.⁸³ Rhetoric changes the meaning of words like “just” so that no universal application of “justice” is possible.⁸⁴ It is against the charge of engaging in rhetoric that Socrates

defends himself in the Apology. Socrates states that he has never engaged in the practice of making the ‘weaker argument the stronger.’⁸⁵

However, if the system elaborated by Socrates represents a tentative impression, then he did not escape from the realm of “rhetoric” into the realm of “being.” Instead, he engaged a circular rhetorical strategy, using metaphorical language intertextually in order to demonstrate “truth.” All that Socrates could “prove” with this tactic was that each aspect of his thinking was linked in strategic ways to his foundational presuppositions. That product does not constitute a proof of anything.

According to Michel Foucault, the most important issues regarding the relationship between state action and determinations of “truth” do not involve the determination of “true” and “false” in the political arena, but the function served by “truth” in collective action. The battle is not over what is “true” and “false” but the rules that determine how such determination are made.⁸⁶ The form taken by “justice” is a product of the rules governing the discourse on “truth.”⁸⁷ Therefore, “truth” cannot be considered outside of structure of power which determines what is and is not acceptable discourse.⁸⁸ It is precisely the rules governing discourse that Socrates sought to control.

From the perspective of the poststructuralists all political systems, including the Socratic one, should be examined for the type of domination their structures make possible.⁸⁹ On the most basic level, the structure of “subjectivity” outlined by Socrates rationalized the disciplinary power of a class that has adopted a “form” of speech, reflection of the transcendental signified, over classes that are not so wise as to “know” the existence of universal forms. All that are outside of the system of truth production suggested by the onto-epistemological strategy of

Socrates will “require” the application of the state’s disciplinary power. Once individuals have been “represented” and classified in relation to “pure being,” they can be made objects of political repression.⁹⁰

The Socratic system rationalizes disciplinary power over all who do not follow it in order to assure that its “purity” cannot be challenged. That requires the control over the production of all cultural “text.” Music must be controlled in order to generate “harmony.”⁹¹ Mothers and nurses must only be allowed to tell the stories to children that have been “authorized.”⁹² Art must be censored in order to reflect the “universal” forms of beauty. Poetry must show the courage in the face of death in order for soldiers not to fear battle.⁹³ Euripides must be banned.⁹⁴ Religion must be controlled in order for the gods to appear only virtuous.⁹⁵ Finally, immigration to the city must be controlled so that alternative systems of “truth” production can be excluded.⁹⁶ All of this in a society that reflects the “natural order”?

The doctrine of the forms has the political function of making this form of disciplinary power “rational” in the hands of the state. Power creates the system of knowledge production that makes its appearance in the form of “universals.” But according to Foucault, intellectuals are not the bearers of universal truth, but persons occupying a specific position in the functioning of the apparatus for “truth” production.⁹⁷ This is a position of power. Therefore, the exercise of power cannot be separated from the production of knowledge.

When coupled with the hierarchical definition of “subjectivity,” the “right” to any form of antidisciplinary speech could be legitimately denied to anyone except the very few at the apex of the political/intellectual pyramid. But further, through the control of what Derrida calls the “cultural archive”⁹⁸ the voice to speak is also denied. The censorship of text within the Republic

is both the means and the result of the exercise of power. By controlling the metaphors used in the production of texts, grafts, and textual scissions, textual dissemination could only reflect the dominant system of thought. In the case of the Platonic dialogues, this means that all discourse would all take place using the metaphors of the “transcendental signified.”

If the “ideal state” was established, that which is arbitrary and historically contingent would appear natural and harmonious. Direct political repression would not even be necessary because there could be no voice in which the alternative thought could be spoken. There could be no political influence that did not reflect the “legitimate” form of discourse sanctioned by the state. The circular logic underlying the state apparatus cannot be challenged. That leaves only the hands of power to determine who is empowered to speak.

When taken as a whole Socrates finds himself in a paradoxical situation with regard to the claims of Thrasymachus. In a state which is governed by an intellectual meritocracy, where the “wisest” have the power to apply their understanding of what is “just” and “unjust,” has Socrates not come to the position of Thrasymachus? Has “justice” not been determined according to the interests of the stronger? The implication of the Socratic program, including the doctrine of the forms, the dialectic, and the natural hierarchy of human beings, suggests that anyone who does not adopt this foundational strategy is “unwise” and therefore not fit to participate in governing. If “fitness” to rule is only established under the strict outline suggested by these assertions, Socrates has not established anything except a rationalization for totalitarian political practice. Thrasymachus is, therefore, vindicated. Justice is the interest of the stronger. In the Socratic state, that means “justice” is defined by those who control the mechanisms of “truth” production and sanction the “appropriate” forms of textual dissemination.

IV. The Voice

Book One of the Republic opens the discussion on “justice.” After Socrates dismisses the arguments of Cephalus and Polemarchus the attention turns to Thrasymachus. When asked to respond to the question regarding the nature of “justice” Thrasymachus replies that “justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger.”⁹⁹ As Socrates begins to question this statement Thrasymachus immediately draws examples from the different forms of governments. “[T]he different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocratical, tyrannical, with a view to the several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interests, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust.”¹⁰⁰

In drawing the link between “justice” and the form of constitutional structure Thrasymachus was suggesting that “justice” is relative to the particular definitions of the “subject,” norms of discourse, and instruments of discipline that both support and reflect the system of power within the state. This is true for the Socratic state as well as the forms tyranny, aristocracy, and democracy.

The “system of ‘justice’” exercises power in the form of establishing the rewards and punishments for actions that conform or fail to conform to the established norms of behavior. The critical question, however, remains. If the foundational premises on which the Socratic definition of justice relied cannot be substantiated, on what basis is the “practice” of exercising “justice” to be based?

By placing the statements of Thrasymachus within the anti-foundational context of poststructural analysis, it is possible to move beyond a definition of “justice” that is simply relative to constitutional forms. From the view of poststructuralism, all constitutions promote the “truth” of a particular form of “subjectivity.” In the Republic the definition of “justice” is contingent upon a “universal” definition of “subjectivity.” This strategy of “aggregation” is necessary in order for the coherent exercise of control. As Derrida states, “objectification” is the essential first step in the application of disciplinary power.¹⁰¹ Taking a broad understanding of this concept and applying it to the statement of Thrasymachus it can be argued that ‘justice is the interest of those who control the discourse on the subject.’

Denying the possibility of foundational support for a universal definition of the “subject” Thrasymachus was forced to return to the question of power. His conclusion was that a norm is called “just” only when the content of that norm is supported by the disciplinary power of enforcement. Denying the universality of “justice,” indicates that what the state calls “just” varies, based on the particular content of “subjectivity” that predominates.¹⁰²

In the references made by Thrasymachus, democracy, aristocracy, and tyranny establish systems of “justice,” rewarding and punishing behavior based on the view of the “subject” they contain, that makes those forms of domination “rational.”¹⁰³ Thrasymachus recognized that the judicial system established in any state will be relative to the structure of power within the state. The judicial system is, therefore, an edifice based on the exercise of power and the definitional content of “subjectivity” that makes its exercise of power rational. The state, and its judicial arm, does not administer abstract, universal, “justice.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The central question of the Republic is “justice.” However, the discussion of “justice” is only conceivable if the possibility exists for the identification of “just” acts. If, however, the definition of “justice” requires the column of truth, the transcendental signified, and the existence of the “forms,” all of which are speculative, then the “natural subjectivity” that must underlie any abstract notion of “universal justice” is also open to challenge. If there is no foundational support for defining the subject there cannot be a natural, universal form of hierarchy, domination, and “justice.” Deconstructing the ontological and epistemological foundations that support the Socratic definition of “justice” leaves only rhetoric in support of the arbitrary exercise of power. All that remains is ‘the interest of the stronger.’

In asserting the link between power and “justice” it is not necessary to conclude that Thrasymachus was arguing in favor of power. Nor can it be argued that he sought to provide support for the arbitrary exercise of power. To the contrary, by asserting that power is what remains after the mask of “subjectivity” is stripped away from the rhetoric of “justice” Thrasymachus provided the preconditions for a critique of power. Like Foucault, Derrida, and other poststructuralists, the assertion that “justice” represents power rather than “truth” provides the first step in the strategy of resistance. This position is in contrast to Socrates, who was willing to die to sustain the power of the state and capitulate to the “idea” of masters, even if the acts of the masters were described as “unjust.”

Through defining the content of subjectivity, then enforcing that content through a system of “justice” the state transforms human beings into the agents of power.¹⁰⁵ It is, therefore, the

power to enforce definitional contents that should be resisted. To that end, Thrasymachus presents the first step to a critique of power, the recognition that the exercise of power lacks any connection to an abstract, universal conception of “truth.”

Admittedly, there are places in the dialogues where Socrates seemed to indicate some understanding of that position. In both the Phaedo and the Republic he acknowledged that the “function” of his system of “knowledge,” “truth,” and “justice” may be more important than the value it contains as “truth.” Maybe, therefore, he did not believe the tale being spun throughout the works. Socrates wanted us to follow, whether or not he is telling a lie and, in the process, he wanted to take the tools away from us to critically examine his statements. If that is the case, in the final analysis Socrates has contradicted his own definition of a philosopher. He has demonstrated that his love for order is far superior to his love for truth. After all, his guardians are to be lovers of the state.

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¹. Plato, 1955, p. 27-28.

². Plato, 1955, p. 28.

³. Socrates even appeared to acknowledge the empirical nature of this exchange between “ideal” and “real” when he sought to quantify the amount of unhappiness visited on those who act unjustly. See Book Nine, p. 342.

⁴. Pitkin, 1972, p. 169.

⁵. Plato, 1955, p. 19.

⁶. Plato, 1955, p. 19.

⁷. Derrida, 1982, p. 93.

⁸. Plato, 1955, p. 209.

⁹. Plato, 1955, p. 213.

¹⁰. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 49.

¹¹. This idea is exemplified in the Syposium, where Socrates states that beauty is something different than that which makes it visible (Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 563.) and in the Phaedo when Socrates suggests that there is a difference between objects that appear equal and the idea of equality. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 56.

¹². Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 48.

¹³. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 48.

¹⁴. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, pp. 86-88.

¹⁵. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 58.

¹⁶. Plato, 1955, p. 278-280.

¹⁷. Plato, 1955, p. 258.

¹⁸. Plato, 1955, p. 266.

¹⁹. This is, of course, the same strategy followed by Kant in The Critique of Pure Reason.

²⁰. Derrida, 1982, p. 93.

²¹. Derrida, 1981a, p. 352.

²². Foucault, 1986, p. 203.

²³. Foucault, 1970, p. 303.

²⁴. Foucault, 1970, p. 120.

²⁵. Foucault, 1986, p. 200.

²⁶. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 94.

²⁷. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 94.

²⁸. Foucault, 1981, p. 45.

²⁹. Foucault, 1973, p. xviii.

³⁰. Foucault, 1973, p. 168.

³¹. Foucault, 1971, p. 25.

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- ³². Derrida, 1981b, p. 24.
- ³³. Derrida, 1981b, p. 45.
- ³⁴. Derrida, 1981a, p. 292.
- ³⁵. Derrida, 1981a, p. 292.
- ³⁶. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 266.
- ³⁷. To use the language of Kant, Socrates needs to produce the “synthetic apriori.”
- ³⁸. Derrida, 1981b, p. 49.
- ³⁹. Derrida, 1981a, p. 297.
- ⁴⁰. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 588.
- ⁴¹. Plato, 1955, p. 20.
- ⁴². Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 72.
- ⁴³. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 506.
- ⁴⁴. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 509.
- ⁴⁵. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 80.
- ⁴⁶. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, pp. 59-60.
- ⁴⁷. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 66.
- ⁴⁸. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 66.
- ⁴⁹. Plato, 1955, p. 253.
- ⁵⁰. Plato, 1955, p. 243.
- ⁵¹. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 499.
- ⁵². Plato, 1955, p. 344.
- ⁵³. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 500.
- ⁵⁴. Plato, 1955, p. 150.

⁵⁵. Plato, 1955, p. 159.

⁵⁶. Plato, 1955, p. 159.

⁵⁷. Plato, 1955, pp. 294-300.

⁵⁸. Plato, 1955, pp. 311-320.

⁵⁹. Plato, 1955, p. 312.

⁶⁰. Foucault, 1973, p. xviii.

⁶¹. Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p. 208-209.

⁶². Foucault, 1980, pp. 95-96.

⁶³. Deleuze in Foucault, LCP, pp. 208-211.

⁶⁴. The concept of an “eternal soul” in the writings of Socrates serve the same foundational role that such an idea has in Christianity or in other religions.

⁶⁵. Derrida, 1981b, p. 14.

⁶⁶. Plato, 1955, pp. 133-134.

⁶⁷. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 51-52.

⁶⁸. Plato, 1955, pp. 129., 139.

⁶⁹. Plato, 1955, p. 149.

⁷⁰. Plato, 1991, pp. 160, 162, 165.

⁷¹. Plato, 1991, p. 159.

⁷². Plato, 1991, p. 159.

⁷³. Plato, 1991, p. 118.

⁷⁴. Plato, 1991, p. 134.

⁷⁵. Plato, 1991, pp. 264-285.

⁷⁶. Plato, 1991, p. 252.

⁷⁷. Plato, 1991, p. 278.

⁷⁸. Plato, 1991, p. 286.

⁷⁹. Plato, 1991, p. 287.

⁸⁰. Plato, 1991, p. 181.

⁸¹. Plato, 1991, p. 181.

⁸². Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 506.

⁸³. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 506.

⁸⁴. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 508.

⁸⁵. Hamilton and Cairns, 1989, p. 5.

⁸⁶. Foucault, 1980, p. 132.

⁸⁷. Foucault, 1986, p. 203.

⁸⁸. Foucault, 1980, p. 131.

⁸⁹. Foucault, 1980, p. 96.

⁹⁰. Derrida, 1982, p. 317.

⁹¹. Plato, 1991, pp. 73-74, 100-102.

⁹². Plato, 1991, p. 72.

⁹³. Plato, 1991, p. 82.

⁹⁴. Plato, 1991, p. 327.

⁹⁵. Plato, 1991, p. 90.

⁹⁶. Plato, 1991, p. 375.

⁹⁷. Foucault, 1980, p. 132.

⁹⁸. See Derrida, 1984.

⁹⁹. Republic, 1955, p. 19. In the translation by Paul Shorey (Hamilton and Cairns, 1989) the

phrasing is; “the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger.”

¹⁰⁰. Plato, 1955, p. 20. In the Republic Thrasymachus was drawn into Socrates’ rhetorical trap by agreeing that rulers can be “fallible.” (Plato, 1955, p. 21.) This strategic error on the part of Thrasymachus allowed Socrates to establish a foundational premise, the existence of true/false, right/wrong, from which his critique could proceed. Not allowing that assumption returns the argument to confluence of power and “justice” suggested by Thrasymachus in the discussion of the different forms of government.

¹⁰¹. Derrida, 1982, p. 317.

¹⁰². From this point of view, the outlawing of “wage labor” in the Soviet Union was not the result of the discovery of an absolute form of “justice.” It was banned because it violated the culture “norm” being promoted by the state as the “authentic,” “natural,” form of “subjectivity.” In the capitalist world, “private property” and the “natural competitiveness” of all human beings exists under similar conditions.

¹⁰³. That is precisely why, for Foucault, the study of the prison is so valuable. It is in the prison where the raw power that lies behind the establishment of “subjectivity” is most obvious. Foucault, 1986, p. 210.

¹⁰⁴. Foucault, 1980, p. 102.

¹⁰⁵. Foucault, 1986, p. 208.